

Illinois Department on Aging Solutions Event:  
Older Americans Act Reauthorization

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It seems that we are a nation of youthfulness, that we seek after and diligently pursue (both financially and emotionally) a fountain of youth. We want not only to act young and dress young...but we also want to look young. And the ads for Viagra, botox, hair colorings, cosmetics to fight wrinkles, and cosmetic surgery, etc., more than underscore this desire. We, as a nation, seem to have lost the ability to age gracefully. We are either consumed with staying or looking or acting young or we are at the opposite end of the spectrum. With every ache and pain or forgetful thought we attribute it to advancing age and look to the medical profession for some pill...to control our cholesterol, our blood pressure, our moods, our weight, our minds...whatever.

Where are the encouragements, indeed the role models, to age gracefully.

I am an advocate of an active life for all ages. We need to stay active physically, mentally, and emotionally our entire lives. It helps give us a sense of worth. And if we are actively engaged in worthy and good causes, we have a sense of usefulness, of productivity, or contributing. Because of bad financial decisions made by my parents throughout their lives, they are now living with my husband and myself, and although there are sacrifices to be made and bumps in the road to be overcome, all-in-all I can see the wisdom and the benefit of them living with us. When the elderly are taken into their extended families and asked for advice...How was this situation handled when you were young. How did you do this or that?...or cook this particular dish?...when they are recognized in this way, it does, if you will, help validate their existence.

It seems to me that we need an entire mind-set revamp in this country, to wit...that there is nothing wrong with getting older. There is nothing wrong with graying hair and extra wrinkles. That indeed, wisdom and life experiences from the elderly need to be valued, they need to be validated and honored and respected. The youth culture rules (why else would advertisers have their largest target audience the younger people) and it is this mind-set that needs adjustment. I find it rather incongruous that a Department on Aging even exists. We have declared that aging is deserving of an entire governmental department. This department is there to study aging, put forth policies and then resolve issues. That is what you do with problems. I do not consider aging a problem that needs to be solved by the government. It is as if the government declared aging not normal and they will help you deal with or overcome this "abnormality" called aging. Aging and death are part of life, and when we mainstream this concept and stop treating aging as a separate event from life, it becomes normalized as part of life.

I realize I am speaking in broad brush strokes, and I am fully aware that there are many exceptions, but generally speaking our culture does not fully appreciate aging or give it its appropriate place. It is just something to be studied and to pass legislation for.

We are living longer than ever before and a healthy lifestyle from cradle to grave is imperative if we are to enjoy the longevity given to us by science. I'm not so sure that living longer is a great boon if the quality of that longevity is any less than the quality of the life the person lived. I would much rather be dead at 70 than live to be 80 if I'm living my last years in a nursing home, being kept alive by medication and machines. So maybe the solution is to look more at the entire lifestyle of America. We are a nation with the majority of people overweight and a majority of them are obese. Obesity not only contributes to many health problems but it almost always precludes any sort of activity or exercise on the part of the obese person, which in turn leads to more health problems. A healthy lifestyle can guarantee the odds are in your favor for being able to be active until death.

I would like to share a personal anecdote. When I was at college I was diagnosed with anemia and hypoglycemia and was told I have a hypothyroid. I thought to myself...here I am, 20 years old and I feel like I'm 120. I started reading books on health and have studied health and nutrition for the last 37 years, from Atkins to vegetarianism, vegan, organic, combining certain foods, yoga, Tai Chi, jogging, walking, etc., I have studied it and incorporated parts of everything into my lifestyle. When I first met my husband, he was 32 and played on a city basketball league. He was also a high school football coach. His idea of replenishing his body after a game was a soda and a candy bar. He also felt that if he exercised during football season, that that would last him for the rest of the year. After we were married he noticed that my stamina and endurance was greater than his. And it seemed he was sick about once a month. He dropped the large amount of sugar from his diet and the excessive amounts of meat. He increased his fruits and vegetables and whole grains, and he started exercising year round instead of seasonally. All of this occurred over approximately a 20 year period. And you see the results standing here before you. A 62 year old that is fit and healthy and rarely gets sick. This all occurred because he was willing to change his lifestyle.

In summary...it seems to me, from my own personal experience and those I have observed, that a healthy lifestyle starts young. It involves not only eating right and exercising but also an attitude style. An attitude about the potential for life's enjoyments and pleasure. And part of that enjoyment and pleasure is enjoying the wisdom and joy that comes from aging gracefully. So maybe that is where the government can help...not so much with the nuts and bolts of aging as with the entire cultural attitude toward it.